

Chapter One

“You got busy in the backseat of a ’78 Ford Granada with Joseph Kowalski—only the most reclusive bestselling author since J. D. Salinger—and you don’t think to tell me about it?”

Keri Daniels sucked the last dregs of her too-fruity smoothie through her straw and shrugged at her boss. “Would *you* want anybody to know?”

“That I had sex with Joseph Kowalski?”

“No, that you had sex in the backseat of a ’78 Granada.” Keri had no idea how Tina Deschanel had gotten the dirt on her high school indiscretions, but she knew she was in trouble.

An exceptionally well-paid reporter for a glossy, weekly entertainment magazine did not withhold carnal knowledge of a celebrity on the editor-in-chief’s most wanted list. And having kept that juicy little detail to herself wouldn’t get her any closer to parking her butt in an editorial chair.

Tina slipped a photograph from her purse and slid it across the table. Keri didn’t look down. She was mentally compiling a short list of the people who knew she’d fogged up the windows of one of the ugliest cars in the history of fossil fuels. Her friends. The cop who’d knocked on the fogged-up window with a flashlight at a really inopportune moment. Her parents, since the cop was in a bad mood that night. The approximately six hundred kids attending her high school that year and anybody *they* told. Maybe short list wasn’t the right term.

“It was 1989,” Keri pointed out, because her boss clearly expected her to say something. “Not exactly a current event. And you ambushed me with this shopping spree.”

Actually, their table in the outdoor café was surrounded by enough bags to stagger a pack mule on steroids, but now Keri knew she’d merely been offered the retail therapy *before* the bad news. It shouldn’t have surprised her. Tina Deschanel was a shark, and any friendly gesture should have been seen as a prelude to getting bitten in the ass.

“Ambushed?” Tina repeated, loudly enough to distract a pair of Hollywood starlets engaging in some serious public displays of affection in a blatant attempt to attract the cheap tabloid paparazzi. A rabid horde that might include Keri in the near future if she didn’t handle this correctly.

“How do you think I felt?” Tina went on. “I reached out to a woman who mentioned on her blog she’d gone to high school with Joseph Kowalski. Once there was money on the table, I made her cough up some evidence, and she sent me a few photos. She was even kind enough to caption them for me.”

Keri recognized a cue when it was shoved down her throat. With one perfectly manicured nail she hooked the 8x10 blowup and pulled it closer.

A girl smiled at her from the photo. She wore a pink, fuzzy sweater, faded second-skin jeans and pink high heels. Raccoon eyeliner made her dark brown eyes darker, frosty pink coated her lips and her hair was as big as Wisconsin.

Keri smiled back at her, remembering those curling iron and aerosol days. If the EPA had shut down their

cheerleading squad back then, global warming might have been a total non-issue today.

Then she looked at the boy. He was leaning against the hideous brown car, his arms wrapped around young Keri's waist. Joe's blue eyes were as dark as the school sweatshirt he wore, and his grin managed to be both innocent and naughty at the same time. And those damn dimples—she'd been a sucker for them. His honey-brown hair was hidden by a Red Sox cap, but she didn't need to see it to remember how the strands felt sliding through her fingers.

She never failed to be amazed by how much she still missed him sometimes.

But who had they been smiling at? For the life of her, Keri couldn't remember who was standing behind the camera. She tore her gaze away from the happy couple and read the caption typed across the bottom.

Joe Kowalski and his girlfriend, Keri Daniels, a few hours before a cop busted them making out on a back road and called their parents. Rumor had it when Joe dropped her off, Mr. Daniels chased him all the way home with a golf club.

Keri snorted. "Dad only chased him to the end of the block. Even a '78 Granada could outrun a middle-aged fat guy with a five iron."

"I fail to see the humor in this."

"You didn't see my old man chasing taillights down the middle of the street in his bathrobe. It wasn't very funny at the time, though."

"Focus, Keri," Tina snapped. "Do you or do you not walk by the bulletin board in the bull pen every day?"

"I do."

“And have you not seen the sheet marked ‘*Spotlight Magazine*’s Most Wanted’ every day?”

“I have.”

“And did you happen to notice Joseph Kowalski has been number three for several years?” Keri nodded, and Tina leaned across the table. “*You* are going to get me an exclusive feature interview with the man.”

“Or...?”

Tina sat back and folded her arms across her chest. “Don’t take it to that point, Keri. Look, the man’s eleventh bestseller is going to be *the* summer blockbuster film of the decade. More A-listers lined up to read for that movie than line up on the red carpet for the Oscars. And he’s a total mystery man.”

“I don’t get why you’re so dedicated to chasing him down. He’s just an author.”

“Joseph Kowalski isn’t just an author. He played the media like a fiddle and became a celebrity. The splashy NY parties with that gorgeous redhead—Lauren Huckins, that was it—on his arm. Then Lauren slaps him with a multi-million dollar emotional distress suit, he pays her off with a sealed agreement and then he disappears from the map? There’s a story there, and I want it. Our readers will eat him up, and *Spotlight* is going to serve him to them because you have access to him nobody else does.”

“Had. I *had* access to him.” Keri sighed and flipped the photo back across the table even though she would rather have kept it to moon over later. “Eighteen years ago.”

“You were his high school sweetheart. Nostalgia, darling! And rumor has it he’s still single.”

Keri *knew* he was still single because the Danielses and Kowalskis still lived in the same small New

Hampshire town, though Mr. and Mrs. Kowalski lived in a much nicer house now. Very *much* nicer, according to Keri's mother.

"You've risen fast in this field," Tina continued, "because you have sharp instincts and a way with people, to say nothing of the fact I trusted you. But this..."

The words trailed away, but Keri heard her boss loud and clear. She was going to get this exclusive or her career with *Spotlight* was over and she could start fresh at the bottom of another magazine's totem pole. And since her career was pretty much the sum total of her life, it wasn't exactly a threat without teeth.

But seeing Joe again? The idea both intrigued her and scared the crap out of her at the same time. "He's not going to open up his insanely private life to the magazine because he and I wore out a set of shocks in high school, Tina. It was fun, but it wasn't *that* good."

Now she was flat out lying. Joe Kowalski had set the gold standard in Keri's sex life. An ugly car, a Whitesnake tape, cheap wine and Joe still topped her personal "Ten Ways to a Better Orgasm" list.

Tina ran her tongue over her front teeth, and Keri had known her long enough to know her boss was about to deliver the kill shot.

"I've already reassigned your other stories," she said. It was an act of interference entirely inappropriate for Tina to do to someone of Keri's status at the magazine.

"That's unacceptable, Tina. You're overstepping your—"

"I can't overstep boundaries I don't have, Daniels. It's my magazine, and your promotion to editorial depends on your getting an interview with Kowalski, plain and simple." Then she reached into her purse and

passed another sheet to her. “Here’s your flight information.”

The reclusive, mega-bestselling author in question was trying to decide between regular beef jerky or teriyaki-flavored when he heard Keri Daniels was back in town.

Joe Kowalski nodded at the cashier who’d actually left a customer half-rung up in an attempt to be the first to deliver the news. It wasn’t the first time Keri had been back. If she’d gone eighteen years without a visit home to her parents, Janie Daniels would have flown out to L.A. and dragged her daughter home by an earlobe.

It was, however, the first time Keri had come looking for him that he knew of.

“She’s been asking around for your phone number,” the cashier added on, watching him like a half-starved piranha. “Of course nobody will give it to her, because we know how you feel about your privacy.”

And because nobody had it, but he didn’t feel a need to point that out. But he was surprised it had taken Keri as long as this to get around to looking him up, considering just how many years Tina Deschanel had been stalking his agent.

“Maybe she’s on the class reunion committee,” Joe told the cashier, and her face fell. Committees didn’t make for hot gossip.

Members of the media had been hounding his agent for years, but only Tina Deschanel, who took tenacious to a whole new level, was Keri Daniels’s boss. Joe had been watching Keri’s career from the beginning, waiting for her to sell him out, but she never had. Until now, maybe.

While he wasn't a recluse of Salinger-esque stature, Joe liked his privacy. The New England dislike of outsiders butting into their lives, combined with his own fiscal generosity—in the form of a ballpark, playgrounds, library donations or whatever else they needed—kept the locals from spilling his business. By the time he struck it big, classmates who'd moved away didn't remember enough about him to provide interesting fodder.

Nobody knew the details of the lawsuit settlement except the lawyers, his family and Lauren—who would be financially devastated should she choose to break her silence. And, as unlikely as it seemed, he and Keri had never been linked together in the media reports his publicist monitored. He managed to keep his private life pretty much just that, despite the hype surrounding the movie.

“You're not old enough for a class reunion,” Tiffany said, batting her way-too-young eyelashes at him.

A half-dozen of each, he decided, tossing bags of beef jerky into his cart. He had a lot more list than cart space left and he kicked himself for not making Terry come along. She could have pushed a second cart *and* run interference on nosy cashiers. She was good in the role, probably from years of experience.

As if on cue, the loudspeaker crackled. “Um...Tiffany, can you come back to register one, please? I have to pick up my kids in ten minutes.”

The girl rolled her eyes and started back toward the front of the town's tiny market, but not before calling over her shoulder, “She's staying with her parents, but I guess you already know where they live.”

Yeah, he guessed he did, too. The only question was what he was going to do about it. He and his entire family

were preparing to leave town for two weeks, and it would be a shame if he missed out on whatever game Keri was playing.

Assuming it was even true. Not that she was in town, but that she wanted to give him a call. In his experience, if there wasn't enough dirt to keep a small town grapevine bearing fruit, people would just add a heaping pile of manufactured fertilizer.

Joe gave a row of pepperoni sticks the thousand-yard stare. If Keri Daniels *was* looking for his phone number, it had to mean somebody had spilled the beans. The rabid pit bull of a woman she worked for had discovered her star reporter had once been the girl of Deschanel's favorite prey's dreams. If that was the case, he and Keri were heading for a reunion and *this* time Keri could do the begging, just like he had before she'd run off to California.

Two hours later, after he'd unloaded his groceries at his own place, he faced his twin sister across the expanse of their mother's kitchen. Teresa Kowalski Porter was *not* a happy woman.

"You are one dumb son of a bitch."

Whereas he liked to play with words—savor them—Terry just spat them out as they popped into her head.

"I thought you were a moron for putting up with her shit then," she said. "But now you're going back for a second helping?"

"I'm ninety-nine percent sure her boss sent her out here in order to use our history to manipulate me into giving the magazine an interview."

"Keri Daniels never needed any help when it came to manipulating people. And I don't even want to think about that other one percent on an empty stomach."

The entire Kowalski family had once held some resentment toward Keri, but Terry's had festered. Not only because his sister knew how to hold a grudge—although she certainly did—but because Keri had hurt her even before she'd gotten around to hurting Joe.

Terry and Keri had been best friends since kindergarten, despite how corny their names sounded when said together. The trouble started during their freshman year when Mr. Daniels got a big promotion. Between the new style Daddy's money bought and a developing body that just wouldn't quit, Keri had soon started circling with a new group of friends. By the beginning of sophomore year, Keri had left Terry in her social dust, and she hadn't been forgiven. Joe's relationship with Keri had been the only thing to ever come between him and his twin.

And that's why he'd come to Terry first. "Aren't you even a little curious about how she turned out?"

"No." She pulled a soda from the fridge and popped the top without offering him one—never a good sign. "She broke your heart and now, almost twenty years later, she wants to capitalize on that and sell you out to further her career. That tells me all I need to know about how she turned out, thanks."

Joe kicked out a chair and sat at the kitchen table. "It's just dinner, Terry. Dinner with somebody who used to mean a lot to both of us."

"Why are you even talking to me about this, Joseph? I could give a shit less about Keri Daniels. If you want to have dinner with her, then do it. You're an adult."

"I need you to cover for me with the family."

Terry laughed, then grabbed a list from the fridge to double check against the army of plastic bins at her feet. “Okay, *almost* an adult.”

“You know Mom’s going to be all over my ass about being ready to go day after tomorrow even though I’m the first one packed every year. If I fall off her radar for even a few hours, she’ll have a fit.”

“You really are a dumbass. Mom knows she’s in town. Tell her you’re going to dinner with the bitch who ripped your heart out of your chest and stomped on it. Do you think three jars of peanut butter are enough?”

“We’re only going for two weeks. And I don’t want the whole damn town to know I’m going to see her.”

“Eight adults and five kids...I guess three will be enough.”

“Terry.” He waited until she looked up from her list. “Seven adults.”

“What? Oh. Yeah.” She laughed at herself, but the pain was written all over her face. “Who’s the dumbass now, huh?”

“He is,” Joe said, not for the first time. “Did you call that divorce lawyer my agent recommended yet?”

“I’m putting it off until the trip is over.” She held up a hand to ward off the argument she knew was coming. “I never thought I’d say this, but I’d rather talk about Keri Daniels.”

“Fine. If she agrees to dinner, I’m going to tell everybody I’ve got a meeting in Boston tomorrow night. Will you back me up?”

“Why didn’t you just tell *me* that, too?” she asked, clearly exasperated now.

“I thought about it. But I kept seeing Keri a secret from you once, sis, and it hurt you when you found out. I didn’t want to do it again.”

She sighed and Joe tasted victory. “Okay, I’ll back you up, but I still think you’re a moron. How many jars of pickles did we go through last year?”

“You want me to do *what?*”

Joe stretched out on the battered leather couch in his office and tried not to laugh at the tone of horrified shock in his agent’s voice. “Dinner date. Reporter from *Spotlight Magazine*. You heard right.”

“Did that Deschanel bitch kidnap one of the kids? Threaten your mother? I know people, Joe. I can take care of this for you.”

“It’s Keri. Keri Daniels.”

A loaded pause. “That’s great. Sure I want to do that for you, Joe, because with a big movie premiere coming up and a deadline approaching, I absolutely want your head fucked up over your high school sweetheart. And exposing yourself professionally to somebody you’ve exposed yourself to personally? Great idea.”

“Dan. Take a breath.”

“Oh, I’m taking so many breaths I’m hyperventilating. I need to put a fucking bag over my mouth. Or maybe put a bag over your head because your brains are leaking out.”

“I’m pretty sure Tina Deschanel found out Keri and I dated in high school and I doubt Keri wants to do this any more than I do.”

“Then don’t do it. Please, for the love of my fifteen percent, don’t do it.”

“I’m just going to have dinner with her and then she can go back to California and tell her boss she tried.”

“Then why don’t *you* call her?”

Good question. One he didn’t particularly care to share the pathetic answer to with Dan.

After all these years, he didn’t want to be reunited with Keri by telephone. He wanted to see her face at the same time he heard her voice. Okay, if he was being honest, he wanted to know if he could see the Keri he’d loved in her.

Worst case scenario, whatever business she felt she had with him could be conducted over the phone and he wouldn’t get to see her at all. It was just curiosity—for old times’ sake—but he wanted to see her again.

“I’m famous,” he said lightly. “I pay people to make my phone calls for me.”

“Bullshit. And speaking of paying people, why are you dumping this on me? Jackie’s in charge of publicity and press.”

“Her head would explode.”

The silence on the other end lasted so long Joe thought his agent might have hung up on him. But no such luck. “Joe, we’ve been together a long time and, speaking as a guy who’s had your back for almost a decade and a half, I think this is even a worse idea personally than it is professionally.”

“I know, but I’m going to do it anyway.”

Keri swallowed another mouthful of non-designer water and resisted glancing at her watch again. Maybe she’d been spoiled by a generous expense account, but meeting

in a cheap chain restaurant in the city was too high a price to pay for privacy, in her opinion.

And what was with Joe having his agent contact her to set up the dinner? He couldn't pick up the phone and call her himself? Maybe his over-inflated ego interfered with telephone use, so he had to use his agent as though she were a total stranger. As if she didn't know he had a birthmark shaped like an amoeba on his right ass cheek.

Unfortunately, her opinions didn't seem to matter. Tina had made it very clear that if Joseph Kowalski held up a hoop, Keri was to jump through it, wearing a pom-pom hat and barking like a dog if that's what it took to make the author happy.

It really burned her ass to be in this predicament, and just thinking about her boss made her temples throb. The temptation to walk out was incredibly strong but, while she knew she could walk into any magazine editor's office and come out with a job, it would set her back years in her quest to climb to the top of the masthead.

It was only an interview, after all.

There hadn't been a new press or book jacket photo of Joe since his sixth book. That picture had pretty much looked like him, albeit without the grin and dimples. It was one of those serious and contemplative author photos and she'd hated it. But by now, especially considering the coin he was pulling down, he was probably a self-indulgent, fat, bald man with a hunched back from too much time over the keyboard.

She, on the other hand, thought she'd aged well. Nothing about her was as firm as it had been in high school, but she was still slim enough to pull off the pricey little black dress she'd chosen for tonight. Her hair, now sleek and smooth to her shoulders, was still naturally

blonde, though she would admit to some subtle highlighting.

“Hey, babe,” a voice above her said, and just like that the sophisticated woman was gone. She was eighteen again, with big dreams, bigger hair, and an itch only Joe Kowalski could scratch.

She could almost taste the Boone’s Farm as she turned, braced for an old, fat Joe and finding...just Joe.

He’d aged even better than she had, the bastard. His face had matured and he had a trace of what men were allowed to call character lines, but he still had that slightly naughtier version of the boy-next-door look. Of course, he wasn’t *quite* as lean as he used to be, but it probably wasn’t noticeable to anybody who hadn’t spent a significant amount of senior year running her hands over his naked body.

All in all, he resembled the boy who’d charmed her out of her pants a lot more than he did the stodgy author she’d hoped to charm into an interview.

“Hi, Joe.” She’d stored up a mental cache of opening lines ranging from cute to funny to serious, and every single one seemed to have been deleted. “Thank you for coming.”

He slid onto the bench seat across the booth from her. “Time’s been pretty damn good to you, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

No, she didn’t mind at all. “You, too. Interesting choice of restaurant, by the way. An eccentricity of the rich and reclusive author?”

He flashed those dimples at her and Keri stifled a groan. Why couldn’t he have been fat and bald except for unattractive tufts of hair sprouting from his ears?

“I just like the all-you-can-eat salad bar,” he said. “So tell me, is Tina hiding under the table? Waiting to pounce on me in the men’s room?”

Keri laughed, partly because it was such a relief to have the topic out in the open. “No, she refuses to leave the city. Says her lungs can’t process unpolluted air.”

His smoky blue eyes were serious even though his dimples were showing. “Terry’s been expecting you to sell me out for your own advantage since I first made the *NYT* list.”

Hearing his sister’s name made her wince, and knowing she still held such a low opinion of Keri just made her sad. During the very rare moments she allowed herself to dwell on regrets, she really only had two. And they were both named Kowalski.

“I’m being professionally blackmailed,” she admitted. “If I don’t get an exclusive interview for *Spotlight* from you, I’m out of a job.”

“I figured as much. Who spilled the beans?”

Keri pulled the 8x10 from her bag and handed it to him. “I don’t know. Do you remember who took that?”

“Alex did, remember? The night we...well, the caption’s pretty thorough.”

She remembered now. Alex had been a friend of Joe’s, but they’d all traveled in the same circle. “But Tina said the blogger who claimed to go to school with you was a woman.”

“His name’s Alexis now. You wouldn’t believe how much he paid for his breasts.”

Keri laughed, but Joe was still looking at the photo. Judging by the way the corners of his lips twitched into a small smile and how he tilted his head, Keri figured Tina had been right about the nostalgia angle.

The waitress approached their table, order pad in hand.

Joe still hadn't looked up. "Remember the night you started drinking your screwdrivers without the orange juice and did a striptease on Alex's pool table?"

"I bet the jokes about Alex's pool table having a nice rack went on forever," the waitress said, and *then* Joe looked up.

"You bet they did," he said easily, but he was blushing.

"There must be a whole new slew of jokes about Alex's rack now," Keri said, making Joe laugh.

The waitress tapped her pen on the tab. "So do you guys know what you want?"

And then he did it, just as he always had whenever he'd been asked that question—he looked straight at Keri with blatant hunger in his eyes and said, "Yes, ma'am, I do."

The shiver passed all the way from her perfectly styled hair to her Ferragamo pumps. Then she watched in silent amusement while he ordered for them both—her regular high school favorite of a medium-well bacon cheeseburger with extra pickles, fries and a side of coleslaw. There was no mention of salad, all-you-can-eat or otherwise.

When the waitress left, she gave him a scolding look. "That's more calories than I've consumed in the last two years, Joe."

He waved away her half-hearted objection. "Let's get down to business."

Keri didn't want to. She was too busy enjoying that sizzle of anticipation she'd always felt when Joe looked at

her. Apparently those blue eyes hadn't lost their potency over the last two decades.

Joe leaned back against the booth and crossed his arms. It was probably supposed to look intimidating, but all the gesture really did was draw attention to how tan and incredibly well-defined his biceps were against his white T-shirt. Typing definitely wasn't the only workout his arms got.

"Let's see if I can synopsisize our situation," he said. "I never give interviews. You want an interview. No, strike that. You *need* an interview, because the rabid jackal you work for has made it clear your job is on the line. Am I close?"

The sizzle receded to a tingle. "You're in the ballpark."

"I'm not just in the ballpark, babe. I'm Josh Beckett on the mound at Fenway. If I don't give you what you need, you're hiding behind palm trees waiting for drunk pop stars to pop out of their Wonderbras."

And that pretty much killed the last of the lingering tingle. "Payback's a bitch and all that, right, Joe?"

The dimples flashed. "Isn't it?"

Keri just shrugged. She wasn't about to start putting deals on the table or making promises. After years of dealing with celebrities, she usually knew how to handle herself. But this was Joe Kowalski. He'd seen her naked and she'd broken his heart. That changed the rules.

"I'm leaving town tomorrow," he said. "I'll be gone two weeks."

The tingle flared up again, but this time it was a lot more panic and a lot less anticipation. "There's always the telephone or fax or email."

"Not where I'm going."

She laughed. “Would that be Antarctica or a grass hut in the Amazon Basin?”

“I’m not even leaving the state.”

Joe had sucked at cards in high school—he had no poker face—but she couldn’t read him now. The instincts that had skyrocketed her to the top of the *Spotlight* food chain were giving her nothing, except the feeling he was setting her up for something she might want no part of.

The waitress brought their food, buying Keri a few more minutes to think. One thing Joe had never had was a mean streak—if there was no chance in hell of the interview happening, he wouldn’t have agreed to meet her for dinner. He’d never had it in him to humiliate somebody for the sake of his own enjoyment.

Granted, the kind of checks he had to be cashing changed a person, but she’d already seen enough of him—and heard enough from her mother—to know Joe was still Joe. Just with more expensive toys.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to have her jumping through hoops, of course. Probably an entire flaming series of them.

She bit into the bacon cheeseburger and the long-forgotten flavor exploded on her tongue. She closed her eyes and moaned, chewing slowly to fully savor the experience.

“How long has it been since you’ve had one of those?” Joe asked, and she opened her eyes to find him watching her.

Keri swallowed, already anticipating the next bite. “Years. Too many years.”

He laughed at her, and they enjoyed some idle chit-chat while they ate. She brought up the movie and he talked about it in a generic sense, but she noted how

careful he was not to say anything even remotely interview worthy.

There would be no tricking the man into revealing something that would get Tina off her back.

“You know,” she said, still holding half her cheeseburger, “I *really* want to enjoy this meal more, and I can’t with this hanging over my head. What’s it going to take?”

“I gave it some thought before I came, and I think you should come with me.”

“Where?”

“To where I’m going.”

Keri set the cheeseburger on the plate. “For two weeks?”

The length of time hardly mattered, since she couldn’t return to California without the interview anyway. But she’d like an idea of what she was signing up for.

“Whether you’re there for two weeks or not is up to you. For each full day you stick it out with the Kowalskis, you get to ask me one question.”

Keri, unlike Joe, did have a poker face and she made sure it was in place while she turned his words over in her head. “When you say the Kowalskis, you mean...”

“The entire family.” The dimples were about as pronounced as she’d ever seen them. “Every one of them.”

Her first thought was *oh shit*. Her second, to wonder if *People* was hiring.

Joe reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a folded sheet of spiral notebook paper. “Here’s a list of things you’ll need. I jotted it down in the parking lot.”

Keri unfolded the paper and read the list twice, trying to get a sense of what she was in for.

BRING: Bug spray; jeans; T-shirts; several sweatshirts, at least one with a hood; one flannel shirt (mandatory); pajamas (optional); underwear (also optional); bathing suit (preferably skimpy); more bug spray; sneakers; waterproof boots; good socks; sunscreen; two rolls of quarters.

DO NOT BRING: cell phone; Blackberry; laptop; camera, either still or video; alarm clock; voice recorder; any other kind of electronic anything.

She had no clue what it meant, other than Joe wanting her half-naked and unable to text for help.